

132 Pages of New and Complete Stories

WESTERN ACTION

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Someone had to meet the stage and break the news to Miss Yancey that her fiance, Bart Jackson was no longer of this world. And who ought to take the job but the man who'd gunned Bart down, in self-defense?



SILVER BUCKLE

by JACK RITCHIE

BART JACKSON looked mighty dead to all of us.

The Judge fingered his gray mustache; Shorty's whiskey hand was frozen halfway up toward his mouth, and smoke dribbled from the .44 Frontier Colt Jim Prescott held in his fist.

Quietly the boys left their tables and the bar to gather around. The clock behind the bar ticked away thirty loud seconds before the Judge spoke.

"Well," he said, "he's sure been asking for it for a long time."

Shorty remembered his drink and tossed it off. He then removed his hat. "Don't like to speak disrespectful of the late-departed, but he was an ornery cuss."

The color was coming back into Jim

Prescott's face and he licked his lips. "It was self-defense," he said; "you all seen him go for his gun first."

The Judge backed him up. "You got nothing to worry about, Jim. We're witnesses." He turned to the circle of faces. "One of you gents run over to the Funeral Parlor and get the Doc."

Somebody left and we were quiet again until Shorty reminded us of something. "Why's Bart dressed up so pretty?" He asked, toeing the corpse. "I ain't never seen him clean and shaved before."

The Judge scratched his ear. "That brings up a problem," he said, looking around. "He was supposed to meet his bride on the afternoon stage."

"Him?" Shorty regarded the body

with new surprise. "What kind of a woman would marry him?"

"Met her on a trip back east," the Judge said. "They been trading letters and he sprung the question."

Everybody started drifting away and I sat down at a table with the Judge, Shorty, and Jim. I pulled out a deck of cards and riffled them to keep my fingers loose.

"That poor woman," I said. "Come all the way from Kansas City, and probably spent her last cent getting here."

"We could take up a collection to send her back," the Judge said speculatively.

I shook my head. "That won't do the trick; she came here to get married."

"Reckon she'll just have to be disappointed," the Judge said. "Bart ain't in no condition to go through with the ceremony."

Shorty shuddered and called for the bottle. "I wonder what she looks like."

"Seems like our civic duty to get that woman a husband." I managed to keep from grinning. "Jim, here, is kind of responsible for her, I figure. I reckon the woman ought to be satisfied with him."

Jim woke up from the trance he was in. "Hold it right there, Slick," he said, giving me a cold eye. "Don't try hooking me with any of your ideas."

SHERIFF McGREGOR pushed through the swinging doors and eased himself into a chair at the table. "What do I have to do, Jim?" he asked. "Hang you or give you a pat on the back for cleaning up our community?"

"It was pretty simple," Jim said. "Bart claimed that my beef was using some of his graze. I told him it wasn't so. And what with our talking, we started calling each other liars. He drawed first."

The sheriff had out brown paper and he was rolling a cigaret. "That

the way it went?" he asked the Judge and me.

My eyes were cloudy as I looked into space. "That poor woman," I said, shaking my head sadly. "All alone here in this wild country without a soul to protect her."

Then I turned to the sheriff as though his question had just penetrated. "Jim's story? Well," I said carefully. "I can see as how some people might say it happened that way."

Jim was getting excited. "You dog-gone right it happened that way. You was right there!"

Shorty looked at me and grinned himself into the game. "Jim tells a pretty good yarn, don't he, Sheriff? Sounds real truthful." He clicked his tongue woefully. "That lonely unprotected little lady."

"What are you hombres trying to do?" Jim demanded. "Judge, you tell the law what happened. These wise jaspers are trying to ruin me."

"Now, now, Jim," the Judge said smiling. "Being the only judge around here I can't commit myself, seeing as how I'll have to sentence you. I don't want anybody to say I'm prejudiced."

"You might get off," I said encouragingly. "Still—!" I let it dangle in the air."

Jim scowled at me bitterly. "You ain't on the jury, Slick. So maybe I got a chance."

The Judge lit up a cigar and puffed at it happily. "Slick," he said. "You strike me as a fairminded man. How'd you like to be foreman of the jury? I got ways of swinging it."

Jim Prescott put his hands over his eyes and groaned.

The sheriff was catching on. "I hear Bart was expecting a bride. Think she'll be shocked seeing a hanging?" He stretched his neck and rubbed it absently.

Jim drummed his fingers on the table and let his eyes travel around the table. "I think you comedians would hang me and think it was a big joke."

He held out for a few seconds more and then came to a decision. "I'm not saying I will and I'm not saying I won't. I got to see her first."

WORLD GOT around and when the stage came in most of the town was on hand. There was even some even money betting about what Jim would do.

Jim's sombrero was pulled down low over his eyes and he had his hands in his pockets. His face was sullen as the shotgun rider hopped off and shoved steps under the coach door.

The droop in his shoulders suddenly disappeared. He took a deep breath of relief and swept off his hat.

She paused momentarily on the first step, surveying the crowd with some embarrassment. On top of her fine-spun blonde hair she wore a bonnet decorated with sprigs of violets. She unfurled a small parasol to protect her complexion from the sun.

Shorty whistled sharply through his teeth and somebody in the back said, "Amen!"

She stepped down and was succeeded by another woman about her age. I could see that this one was taller and her skin was a smooth tan. She grinned with even white teeth at the boys. "What is this?" she asked. "A posse?"

Jim advanced upon the smaller woman. "'Ma'm," he said. "The name is Jim Prescott. May I have the privilege of escorting you to our hotel."

She gave him her hand. "I expected a Mr. Bart Jackson," she explained. She seemed prettily confused by the attention she was receiving. "My name is Nan Yancey, and this," she indicated the tall redhead, "is Miss Belle Merrill, my cousin."

I stepped forward, doffing my hat. "'Ma'm," I said soberly, "I'm afraid we have some grave news for you."

The Judge edged in between Jim and me and introduced himself. "Perhaps the hotel lobby would be more appropriate," he purred gently.

When the hotel doors closed on the crowd, we stood around with somber expressions while the worried Miss Yancey took a seat. Miss Merrill took off her hat and freed her hair with a toss of her head.

The sheriff and the Judge exchanged glances, and the Judge took over. "I'm terribly sorry to have to break this to you," he said. "But Mr. Jackson is no longer with us. He passed suddenly from this world and is grieved for by all of his many friends."

"Oh, dear," she whispered. She brought out a small handkerchief and dabbed at the tears forming in her eyes. "Oh, dear," she said again, helplessly. "What am I going to do!"

Miss Merrill looked down at her. "Cheer up, honey," she said; "looks like you won't miss him in the crowd."

Miss Yancey reprimanded her with reproachful eyes.

"Never you fear, 'Ma'm," Jim said, his chest expanding about four inches. "I personally will see to it that you come to no harm."

Miss Yancey gazed at him tearful gratitude, then she rose. "I hope you'll understand if I go to my room now; I'd like to be alone for a while."

Shorty caught the full brunt of her sweet sad smile and rocked on his heels.

WHEN THEY were gone upstairs, we stood there quiet and thinking. Keeping tight hold of the grin that was about to bust out, I said, "It don't seem right to me that that fair little creature should be subject to a murderer's foul intentions."

Jim stuck his thumbs in his gun belt. "I ain't no murderer, and besides, my intentions is downright pure."

The Judge sighed. "I wonder if any one of them would prefer a more mature type of man."

The street door opened and Doc came in wiping his face with a red bandanna. He appeared vaguely dis-

appointed. "You heard yet?" he asked. "Bart ain't dead."

We all stared at him.

"That's right," he said. "Noticed his eyes flicker just as I was about to shove on the lid. He's pretty near gone, but I reckon that with luck he ought to pull through."

Jim Will fingered his gun thoughtfully. "Wonder if I should go over and finish the job."

"I know how you feel," the Doc said. "I was near tempted to nail him up anyway."

In the evening I was in my best suit, clean and shaved and smelling of perfume water when I rode over to the hotel. My new silver-plated Mexican spurs were shiny and jingling as I strode into the lobby.

Miss Yancy and Belle Merrill were at a table the hotel owner keeps in the lobby for any guests who might want to play a few hands before retiring.

They didn't have to worry about being lonely, seeing as how the Judge, Jim, and half a dozen of the town's citizens were hanging around them.

Miss Yancey motioned me over. "Mr. Prescott's been telling me that Mr. Jackson isn't dead. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Jim always was a lousy shot," I said, "now that I think of it."

Miss Yancey smiled at Jim. "I'm sure Mr. Prescott didn't mean to harm him."

"Miss Yancey," Jim said. "Would you do me the honor of allowing me to show you our local points of interest? The night is fine for a stroll."

"Why, I'd be delighted," she said, rising.

Jim swaggered as he escorted her through the lobby and out of the door.

"Don't let it get you down," Belle said to me. "There are other nights, and besides, you've got me to talk to."

But I didn't manage to get a word in, what with the Judge and the other cowpokes gabbing. I picked up a deck of cards and riffled them until I got a

chance to get a word in. "You from Kansas City too?"

She watched me with the cards and slowly smiled. "No," she said. "I was just up there for a visit when I got hooked for the job of chaperone. We're third cousins, Nan and me."

Belle picked up a box of chips and emptied it on the table. "Anyone here interested in a little game of draw?"

AFTER A few seconds surprise, everybody got out his money and we had a six handed game. The first few hands were cautious and polite, but then the Judge ordered a bottle and we got down to business.

She played like an expert, knowing when to raise, see, or drop out. And she wasn't bad either at dealing from the bottom.

I had to give her credit, though; she did it only when she hit a losing streak.

I was helping luck along a little more than she was, but cards was my business and a man's got to eat.

Jim and Miss Yancey came back in about an hour. Miss Yancey was rather shocked and retired to her room with a headache.

Around eleven o'clock the game broke up. Everybody said goodnight and what a fine time they had while I counted my winnings and wrapped them in a bandanna.

Belle saw the last of them to the door and stopped me as I was about to take my leave. I noticed now that she wore a divided riding skirt.

"I bought myself a pretty little Morgan horse this afternoon," she said. "How about some exercise?"

"Why not," I said. "I could use some air."

She got her hat and we unhitched our horses. She mounted and sat her horse like she belonged there.

The moon was soft as we clattered past the roaring saloons and out of town. We picked our way through the greasewood and sage, gradually in-

creasing our speed until we got into a race.

Side-by side we made a circle around the town. For the first mile we were even, but then my blooded bay began inching ahead. By the time we came tearing into the opposite end of town I was leading by four lengths.

We pulled up and walked our horses to the livery stable and turned them over to the boy.

On the slow walk back to the hotel Belle admired the stars for a while. Then she came closer to earth. "You're pretty good with cards," she said; "is that how you make a living?"

"I manage to pick up a dollar here and there," I conceded. "Where did you learn to deal?"

"My father taught me, but I don't use any tricks, except on special occasions. Like when I see somebody doing it first." She stopped at the hotel entrance. "Did you ever get caught?"

"Just once," I said. "It was on a Mississippi River Boat. I learned how to swim in a hurry."

THE NEXT afternoon I got to the hotel soon after dinner. Miss Yancey was bonneted and ready to go out. She immediately took my arm and we went out again.

"I don't like to ride," she said. "I don't think it's quite right for a woman. Especially western style."

I helped her down the boardwalk and across the main street. "There isn't much other way to get around."

We passed several cowpokes who touched the brims of their hats politely. "I saw Mr. Jackson this morning," she said. "The poor man was ill, of course, still..."

I looked down at her. "He sure must have been spruced up in Kansas City. Out here he never looked like much, sick, drunk, or sober."

We stopped for a minute at Martinez's shop and watched him working on his silver studded belts. "You don't

need to worry about marrying him; no one in town expects you to, or thinks you should."

She played with the handle of her parasol. "I understand Mr. Jackson has a large ranch not far out of town," she said.

"It's a one room shack," I said. "And he has a few half-starved cows."

She appeared thoughtful. We turned away from the shop and continued slowly ahead. "Mr. Prescott is such a wonderful man. He told me he owns nearly fifty-thousand cows. Imagine!"

"He owns half the county," I said.

After a few steps, she said brightly, "Tell me, Mr. Travis, do you own the other half?"

"No," I said. "But I got my eye on old man Wilson's place. He's talking of selling."

"I'll just bet it's a great big place, with a large house and patios and things."

"It's a lot better than Jackson's place," I said, truthfully. "It's got possibilities with a little work."

The rest of our walk we talked mostly about Jim Prescott, though a few other prominent citizens of the town got into the conversation.

When we returned to the hotel we found Belle Merrill sitting out front under the wooden awning. She wore boots and her riding skirt and she was cleaning a .41 Colt Lightning.

"Hello, you two," she said, snapping a piece into place.

"I wish you wouldn't point that thing, Belle," Miss Yancey said. "It might be loaded."

"It might be," Belle agreed, sighting down the barrel in our direction.

Miss Yancey turned to me and extended a delicate hand. "It's been delightful, Mr. Travis," she said, and with a parting smile, she disappeared through the door.

I stuck my thumbs in my cartridge belt and finally decided to move on. "I'll be seeing you," I said.

Belle had her head down and was working the trigger mechanism. "It's been delightful," she said.

I HEADED back to Martinez's shop and looked over his line of goods. A woman's belt studded with silver conchas and turquoise seemed like the best thing to me. I had Martinez engrave initials on the buckle before wrapping it up.

After supper at the cafe, I went back over to the hotel. It was a fine night and I felt pleased with myself as I toted the small package.

Belle was in the lobby surrounded by the Judge, Shorty, the sheriff, and a few of the local characters. They were all neat and brushed, but it was Belle who made me stop in my tracks.

She wore a shining magenta satin that made me wonder how in the world she could get tanned so far. Her eyes sparkled in the lamplight and earrings flashed as she moved.

The boys didn't notice me or didn't care, but she reduced her dazzling smile. Her eyes traveled to the package. "Nan is still upstairs," she said. "How nice," she continued, as they turned toward me. "You've brought her a present." Her voice didn't sound normal to me.

Jim had been leaning against the clerk's desk and now he straightened up. His face was set in firm lines as he confronted me.

"There's one thing we got to get settled right here and now," he said in a tight voice.

I lifted an eyebrow. "Say your piece."

"I can't talk like you," he said bitterly. "So we'll talk my way." He flicked his thumbnail against the butt of his gun.

"Hold on!" the sheriff roared. "There'll be no shooting while I'm around."

Jim threw him a disgusted glance and then thought of another idea. He

unbuckled his gun belt and dropped the equipment on the table.

"I'm warning you to stay away from Miss Yancey," he said. "And if you want to argue about it, take off your sixshooter and we can get down to swinging."

He was six feet tall, but I still had an inch on him and maybe twenty pounds. I smiled at his enthusiasm. "Can't we settle this some civilized way?"

"Sure," said the Judge. "We can't have this fighting, especially not in front of a lady."

"Don't mind me," Belle said. "I'd like to see a little bloodshed."

"How about a hand of poker?" Shorty suggested helpfully. "The loser stays away from Miss Yancey."

That seemed to strike the right note and everybody jumped in to agree.

Jim eyed us uncertainly and then he swallowed. "All right," he said. "I guess that's fair enough."

BELLE GOT up suddenly and I watched her as she headed for the street door and slammed it after her.

"I wonder what we done that's wrong," Shorty said. "She seemed awful mad."

We sat down at the table and I reached for the cards. Jim put his hand on top of them. "If it won't inconvenience you, Slick," he said evenly, "we'll let the Judge do the dealing."

The Judge took the pack, shuffled it thoroughly, and dealt out the cards.

I had a real miscellaneous hand, so I kept the deuce of diamonds and a seven of clubs. "I'll take three cards," I said.

Jim sweated out his pasteboards and his face cleared. "I'll take two," he said, throwing away his discards.

The Judge counted out three for me and two for Jim. I examined my hand close to my chest and discovered that I had three sevens.

"What have you got, Jim?" I asked. Jim spread his hand on the table, face up. He had three sixes, a king, and a ten.

I folded my cards and shoved them into the middle of the deck. "You win," I said. "I had nothing but a pair." I extended my hand, "Good luck," I said convincingly. "I guess the better man won."

We had drinks all around and then I got up with my package and said goodbye. I let my shoulders sag as I left and I could hear Shorty saying, "That Slick ain't such a bad guy. He's a genuine gentleman loser."

I searched the town for forty-five minutes before I found Belle. She was at the last corral staring out at the manzanilla and sage. A small wind was feathering her hair in the moonlight.

I came beside her and hooked my heel over the lowest rail. "You can catch cold in an outfit like that," I said. "Even in this country."

She whirled around. "Oh," she said. "It's you." Her eyes were brimming and there was a sparkle of tear on her cheeks. "Am I supposed to congratulate you?"

"That won't be necessary," I said softly. "I lost."

She brought out a lace handkerchief. "I suppose they didn't let you deal; that was clever of them."

"No," I said. "They didn't let me deal." I held out the package for her.

Defiance came into her eyes. "I don't want it," she said, her voice breaking. "Go away!"

I tore away the paper and let the belt uncoil. I put my arms around her and held it before her face. "This won't exactly go with the outfit you're wearing, but I still think it was made for you."

The desert was bright with the moon. The silver ornaments shimmered and the blue stones glowed coolly. It was light enough so that the initials B. M. on the buckle were plain to see.

Belle gasped and then after a moment turned in my arms until she was facing me. Our faces were close together and our eyes met. And when we began our first long kiss, we both knew that this was the way things had to be.



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